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Even as critics accuse the White House of softening national enforcement of environmental standards, there's a way to help clear smoggy skies locally that conservatives can embrace, an area Republican politician told business leaders Monday.

"This is really a program to reduce air pollution that a Republican can love," Northbrook Village President Mark Damisch said of the Clean Air Counts campaign, speaking to about three dozen business representatives from Lake and Cook counties. "It's entirely voluntary."

It's also free, and can save money, Damisch explained in an address to the Transportation Management Association of Lake-Cook in Deerfield.

Northbrook and 126 other Chicago area businesses and governments have altered operations under the program to reduce ozone and other pollutants, according to the Metropolitan Mayor's Caucus' Clean Air Counts. Among the strategies they employ are using van or bus pools to reduce driving, and cutting electricity usage -- and therefore power plant emissions -- by purchasing office equipment that goes dormant when not in use. Such Energy Star equipment cuts power usage 75 percent, according to Kate Agasie, administrator of the caucus' efforts.

The campaign has been around for about five years, and last year unfurled a pilot public relations program in Chicago's Clybourn Avenue Corridor to try to get more businesses on board. The drive has brought in 17 Northwest Side companies so far, Agasie said.

She hopes to sign many more this year in the Lake-Cook Corridor, home to hundreds of businesses from Highland Park to Buffalo Grove. Monday's meeting sponsored by the Lake-Cook Transportation Management Association was intended to kick off the year's effort.

The TMA, a new campaign member, itself has had several years' head start on local pollution reduction. It began its "Shuttle Bug" van pools now serving Northbrook, Deerfield, Bannockburn,

Buffalo Grove, Glenview, Lake Forest, Lincolnshire, Mettawa, Prospect Heights and Riverwoods business in 1996. Now, there are 17 "Shuttle Bug" buses serving 33 companies from Deerfield's Lake-Cook Road Metra station and other depots. TMA executive director Bill Baltutis says the shuttles handle about 1,200 trips a day, 72 percent of which were previously taken by individual vehicles.

The alternatives to voluntary pollution reduction efforts, depending on national politics, could be grim. If the Chicago area is still classified "a severe non-attainment area" for ozone and other pollutants, consequences could include loss of federal transportation funds. "The stick is way out there in 2010," Baltutis said. "We don't want that stick to come down."

Some worry that measures such as enforced reduction in vehicle use -- akin to Mexico City's rules about using cars on alternate days -- could also be in the offing if pollution doesn't significantly decrease. Campaign proponents say that the effects of Chicago area's air pollution kills 3,500 people annually.

The Clean Air Counts campaign is also concentrating on two more "demonstration corridors" this year -- one in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood and another in south Cook County, in and around Matteson and Tinley Park.

Many of the practices the businesses have used also work for homeowners, and in the Clybourn Corridor, over 200 families signed up. The Metropolitan Mayor's Caucus wants about 250 individual families to join from the Lake-Cook area. Individuals and business representatives interested in committing to any degree of pollution reduction can find out how by visiting the Internet site at <http://www.cleanaircounts.org/>.

Grants are available for natural plantings and other pollution-control efforts pushed by the campaign. Damisch, chair of the Caucus' Clean Air Counts political effort, has lobbied for federal appropriations each of the last two years. He said U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk (R-10th) helped get \$800,000 through the House Appropriations Committee late last month, and he now expects the funds to be approved by Congress.

Northbrook's Underwriters Laboratories has had its own van pools for 25 years, according to Randy Damrow, head of facilities operations. Since joining the Clean Air Counts Campaign a

couple of years ago, Underwriters has added several other power-saving or pollution-decreasing strategies, including buying low-emission paint.

"We have 750,000 square feet" of floor space in Northbrook, Damrow said. "That's a lot to paint." Using a formula provided by the campaign, he said his company in 2003 prevented 228 pounds of poisonous compounds from entering the air by changing paint, which cost about \$1 extra a gallon.

Using the same formula, he said the vans prevented thousands of additional emissions from entering the air, for a total from all practices of almost 20 tons.

Damrow said by Underwriters Laboratories providing vans, "260 less (cars are) on the road. That doesn't look like much, but when you stack them all up in the left lane getting off the Edens, God love 'em."

Underwriters and nearby Allstate, in unincorporated Cook County, both have set aside gasoline-powered lawn mowers in favor of unmown areas on their campuses, which eliminates emissions. Both complexes also use lower-power light bulbs and florescent tubes indoors.

Allstate's Patrick Sarb said the company saves power on its hundreds of toilets through low-volume flush mechanisms. An automated flush of one and a half gallons takes a lot less power than the three and half gallons that used to go down the drain, he said.

Agasie said members' activities are reducing introduction of airborne pollutants by five tons a day, and hope to quadruple that in coming years.

The pitch by Agasie and others from the campaign impressed at least one business representative. James Belmont, vice president of U.S. Bank, said after the session that local branches have brought on board a few of the campaign's suggestions. He wants to get other branches from Ohio east to the Pacific Ocean to consider similar pollution reductions. "I want to get corporate in Minneapolis aware of this program," he said.